ANOTHER NEW RELIGION?

March 20, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:10-17
John 12:20-32

"...when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself."
-John 12:32

It has occurred to me that the religion people often reject is not my religion, or any religion that I recognize, but the religion of their childhood, old religion, legalistic, pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die religion.

People are always telling ministers why they aren't religious. You'll be making the normally inane small talk in a social situation and after you have revealed what you do for a living your conversation partner says - "Oh, I used to be religious, when I was a child. My parents used to force me to go to church every Sunday. It was awful. I haven't been back since - except, you know, for weddings and funerals." There is usually a lot of nervous laughter and uneasiness. Sometimes there are horror stories about awful preachers, cruel Sunday School teachers, rampant hypocrisy... One man once told me that he hadn't been back to church ever since an army chaplain insulted him during the Korean War.

Now I am generally pleased that people do this. I observe that disbelief is not easy... that we spend a lot of time explaining it - trying to reassure ourselves, I suppose, that it's okay not to believe. But it has occurred to me, after a fair number of instances in which I found myself in the curious position of trying to defend a kind of religion that was essentially indefensible, that what thoughtful people often reject is a caricature, an aberration, a religion that ought to be rejected.

A recent issue of The New Yorker contained Pauline Kael's review of a new British documentary film, Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done. Ms. Kael titled her review "God's Pickpockets." The film focuses on that most visible expression of religion - the televangelists and their prodigious ability to generate cash. The documentary shows Kevin Whittum, a victim of a terrible bone disease, asking viewers to send money in to the P.T.L., and then reveals that Mr. Whittum is actually under contract. In the second part the film explores the gap between the beliefs and practices of some

hugely successful religious enterprises and the values and teachings of Jesus. The head of a Bible College testifies that Mother Teresa is condemned to hell because she hasn't had the born again experience. In an inner city chapel destitute men are shown sitting for hours listening to a minister droning on, in order to earn a reward of a thin sandwich before they are put out and locked out for the night.

The last line of Pauline Kael's review is a haunting question... one which thoughtful people have asked a lot recently: "How could Christianity have become so debased, so mean?" There are two answers to that important question. The first is that it is only possible for Christianity to be debased if it forgets the one who said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself..."

The second reason is that religion has a way of forgetting its most important ideas. The business of religion, William Stringfellow once remarked, is religion, i.e. the rules and regulations, the structures and institutions which have been spawned by the original idea. That is not unique to religious institutions, by the way. The first priority of an institution - every institution - is survival. The larger and more complex institutions become, it seems, the more they invest their creativity and energy in the goal of institutional survival - and the further they stray from the original idea.

Thus Dietrich Bonhoeffer, before he died, called for a religionless Christianity. And Hans Kung, in a remarkable assertion in his new book, Why I Am Still A Christian says -

> "I would not wish to maintain that everything connected with the institutional upholders of Christianity is Christian."

Kung views himself as a faithful churchman - but his conscience compels him to object.

> "I cannot think that the one to whom Christianity appeals, Jesus of Nazareth, would today take up the same attitude as (church) authorities on the questions at issue..." and then he lists them - "birth control, remarried divorced people at communion, ordination for women and married men."

Now that should not produce any smugness for Protestants. There are plenty of examples for us - of religion badly out of step with Jesus. Some Protestants continue to push for book banning and censorship in public schools - have fought and continue to fight racial segregation... And in the sorrowful events in Belfast, cheered on and supported by right-wing zealots in America, Protestants showed themselves capable of despicable bigotry and violence.

It is an old dynamic. It begins early in the story. We have been thinking about the idea of the Covenant during this Lenten Season... God's promise to be God to his people. - God's gracious presence with those people... Part of that story is how the Covenant is debased by the religion the people create to remember it and celebrate it.

God comes to Noah and tells Noah that he will never be forgotten. God comes to Abraham and Sarah and promises to be God to them and their descendants. God comes to the people as they wander in the wilderness. The message is the same. I will be God to you. I love you as a mother loves her children. I want life and joy for you as a father wants that for his family. I want you to live in justice and to be a light to the rest of the world - my big, diverse, extended family. And those magnificent, sweeping ideas keep being reduced and subdivided and squeezed into the rules and laws of religion. Instead of bringing the creation together in the Creator's love, religion becomes exclusive, narrow and nasty. Instead of welcoming everybody to the banquet table, religion acts like an exclusive club and starts to devise ways to keep out undesirables.

And then tragedy. The nation is defeated in battle by Babylon. Its armies are overrun. Jerusalem is ravaged and the Temple, the visible reminder of God's promise, is leveled. The people are lined up and marched across the desert to Babylon where they exist in captivity for decades - humiliated, exiled, separated, lost. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" they ask. "How can we be faithful to the Covenant if we can't be religious in the Temple?"

Then one day the word comes: "We're going home... We're going back to Jerusalem - to rebuild and begin again - and this time we'll get it right!"

The prophet Jeremiah, in one of the loveliest images in the Bible wrote:

> "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord,
> when I will make a new covenant.
> I will put my law within them,
> I will write it upon their hearts;
> and I will be their God, and they
> shall be my people."

Five and half centuries before Christ a prophet by the name of Jeremiah was describing God, not in traditional terms as an angry, judgmental authoritarian, but as a loving parent, who stoops and takes her people - her dear children - by the hand and leads them out of bondage. It is a touchingly intimate theology... God is a lover: God is like a mother who tends to her children; like a father who watches over them and cradles them.

God's law is not written on tablets of stone. This God's law gets inside them - in their hearts - where they live.

This is not just a bigger and better religion with stronger rules and fancier liturgies. This is something new - a new Covenant... Its content is God's grace, God's inclusive love, God's justice, God's peace.

I want to draw a direct line between that magnificent insight of Jeremiah's and the central event of Christian faith: the crucifixion.

At a level deeper than we are able to understand or explain, the crucifixion of Jesus addresses us. It has not been a cheerful week. It has not been a good week for summery spirituality and possibility thinking... A Protestant terrorist threw a hand grenade into a crowd of Catholic mourners in Belfast. And at the funeral of one of the casualties, the crowd killed two British security agents. Israeli soldiers shot more Palestinians. Tensions mounted in South Africa. Iran and Iraq continued their war; and several battalions of American troops were dispatched to Honduras.

The world, to borrow an image from St. Paul, seems to be "groaning in travail." What our Lord knew - with everything in him - was that his dying was God's way of staying with the world, not abandoning it. It was God's way of making good on their new Covenant.

The crucifixion of Jesus happens in the middle of the world. The crucifixion of Jesus means that in the middle of the worst darkness some of us dare to see God's presence. The cross is the promise that God has not given up on us. God continues to love. God continues to work for reconciliation and healing even in the midst of the worst and cruelest human events. It is the final mystery. This public execution, this ugliness becomes - by faith - the source of hope and beauty and peace... for the world and for each of us.

It is not yet another new religion with better prayers and hymns. It is a covenant, a promise, written in the heart. It is, Jeremiah realized, an intimately personal promise that God will be God to us; that each of us will be son or daughter to God. That new Covenant is not carved in stone or written on a scroll. It is in our hearts.

It is there, of course, in the perimeter of our own heart, where we have our being. It is in our heart where the deepest hurts hurt and the noblest dreams and worst fears and highest joys reside.

It is when we are who we are and when we ask those questions we dare not ask out loud... Do I matter? Does my life count? Is there anything lastingly significant about these years I am living? When I die, will anybody care?

Professor William Muehl who teaches at Yale - put it personally and powerfully:

"The people to whom the Gospel is to speak today are not huddled fearfully in the shadow of ancient altars... they are rather wandering about aimlessly, troubled by the increasing suspicion that no one literally gives a damn about what they do." [<u>All The Damned Angels</u>, p. 38]

To that modern dilemma - meaninglessness, aloneness and exile - the Gospel speaks a word and it is the word of the cross. The cross, final mystery, means that you matter, ultimately, to God... That God knows your name.. That you and your life are important to God... That there is nowhere you can go that God will not be with you. This dying means that the worst that can happen has already happened - to God's son and,

therefore, you can live with the confidence that God will be there - in the valley of the shadow of death - with you and for you.

The cross means that God knows every darkness, every exile.

The crucified one means that nothing can ever separate you from God's love.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself..." Jesus said.

Five centuries before, Jeremiah put it -

> "I will make a new covenant with them,
> I will put my law within them,
> I will write it upon their hearts."

We are not persuaded, or changed, or converted, by much arguing. It requires an act of love. It takes something that will get inside us, something in our hearts.

Every year at about this time I recall one of my moments of clarity and conversion. Still exploring Christianity as an intellectual option (a process I have in no way abandoned) - I had about concluded that the academics were right; we are alone in this universe, and that better marching orders could be found in the Holy Trinity of Sartre, Camus and Kafka than in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

I concluded that the coup de grace, literally, was the crucifixion... It was so consistent with humankind's clear propensity to kill its best people and best ideas...

And then Walter Phillips, an Australian Doctoral candidate, older and wiser, with whom I could say these things, finally - in Holy Week in fact - said simply:

> "John, the crucifixion is not only what the world did to Jesus. It is what God did - and does - for the world."

It is final mystery and final meaning...

The best any of us can do is fall silent as we are drawn to this one who was lifted up -

to resolve, somewhere in our hearts, simply to love him, and somehow to live in a way that reflects that love...

and to recall every time we see a cross, that it was his, and that what happened was for us.

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The music of the Passion is strong and honest: we only sing it in these weeks - and to sing it is, in the best sense, to pray it. One of the strongest and most beautiful is a very old hymn - Ah, dearest Jesus -

As you sing it - pray it -

> "Therefore, dear Jesus, since I cannot pay Thee, I do adore Thee, and will ever pray Thee, Think on Thy pity and Thy love unswerving, Not my deserving."

3/20/88